A tribute to the human spirit

Alice Hoffman tells the story of Masada from the point of view of four extraordinary women

AN AERIAL view of Herod's three-tiered northern palace. The novel's insights apply to the ancient and modern worlds.

• GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, about a thousand Jews seized control of palaces, provisions and fortifications built several decades earlier by King Herod the Great at Masada, a mountain overlooking the Dead Sea, about 100 kilometers from Jerusalem. They held out against the Roman Legion until 73 CE when, according to Josephus, a Jewish-Roman historian, they committed mass suicide to avoid capture, torture and enslavement. Only two women and five children survived.

In The Dovekeepers, her 28th novel, Alice Hoffman tells the story of Masada from the point of view of four extraordinary women. Because her mother died in childbirth, Yael is rejected by her father, a Sicarii zealot. Revka, a baker's wife, witnesses the rape and murder of her daughter, which renders her grandsons mute. Raised as a boy, Aziza is a superb rider, marksman and warrior. Adopt at magic and medicine, Shirah, her mother, is renowned and reviled as The Witch of Moab.

A tale of struggle, sexual desire, sacrifice and solidarity, The Dovekeepers is searching and suspenseful. A narrative, Hoffman reminds us, can convey different things to different people. Her novel, to be sure, is a "woman's book," in which the protagonists are ruined and delivered by love. A tribute to the human spirit, it draws you in, and won't let you go.

The Dovekeepers is not without flaws. The prose is repetitious. Too often, Yael's father "glares" and "beaters." Too many faces grow "ashen." And Hoffman tends to show - and tell. The salt-laden rain that fell on Masada, Revka indicates, would give pain to wounded men, poison orchards, contaminate cisterns, curdle fresh milk and douse the flames that cook evening meals - and then adds, "It would have been better to have no rain at all than to have this."

Reporting that one of the most beloved Jewish warriors at Machaerus was "tortured in the open in ways too horrible for most decent men to imagine," Aziza then describes how the Romans cut off pieces of his flesh and filled him with burning thorn plants.

At times, moreover, a modern sensibility enters the narrative. Convinced at first that Yael was a "foolish, selfish girl," Revka, who disdains "chirping good humor," did not imagine that she would live in her house, "if one can rightly call a single chamber with a curtain as a divider from neighbors a proper home."

When Yael asks a "Man from the North" captured by the Sicarii during a clash with the Romans why he is a slave, the man shings and replies, "Why are you?"

And scattered throughout the text are references to "children of light and children of darkness," "freedom fighters," those who believe in attending to rules or "proclaim I'm your man."

Despite these blemishes, The Dovekeepers is a remarkable novel, full of insights, tart and smart, that are equally applicable to the ancient and contemporary worlds.

Revka recalls that her husband asked only for a blessing from God each day for the halla he produced: Leaving a white mark with his "baker's kiss," he assured her that if "we paid no attention to what was around us and did no harm, we would be safe." Revka can only wonder what he "would have thought of a world that was too hot for bread, too brutal for human kindness."

When The Man from the North flops convention by telling the dovekeepers his name (which was supposed to be known only to hiskinsman and his God), Aziza speculates about his decision: "Know a man's name and he belonged to you. In return, no matter how you might deny it, you were his as well."

"Our people," Aziza notes, "believe that the world is split in two. On one side are the malachim, the thousand angels of light; on the other the mazzikim, demons whose numbers are unknown, and who cannot always be controlled by the Almighty. At times, as it did at Masada, when the Sicarii Jews chose to end their lives, bloody but unbowed, it does not seem at all clear that the party of God is the one prevailing."

And yet, as the dovekeepers (and Alice Hoffman) remind themselves, each other and us, if life on earth is terrible, it is also beautiful.

"Being human means losing everything we love best," Shirah says, "but would you ask to be anything else?"

With talk of a third Temple by the soon-to-be martyrs, the Witch of Moab predicts that "from destruction there would be light."

And maybe, just maybe, men and women, Jews and gentiles would make sure that doves scattered their leavings throughout the countryside, turning the world "green and lush, nourishing the roots of the dates and olives, feeding the almond trees, causing them to burst into blooms of pink and white clouds."

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